



Engineer soldiers attending Fort Leonard Wood's advanced non-commissioned officers' academy creep close to the entrance of a cave where suspected "enemy" troops are hiding during a cave-clearing training exercise. The academy developed the training from lessons learned in Afghanistan.

CLEARING THE CAVES

Story by SPC Chris Charlton
Photos by Paul Disney

A YOUNG soldier silently creeps along the moist walls of a cave far from his home. It's so dark he can't see his hand just an inch from his face. But, he's not alone.

The rest of his squad is close behind. They remain silent as they search the unfamiliar depths of the twisting cavern.

After hours of relying on their own instincts and equipment, they find what they've been looking for. A distinct glow in the distance has led them to the mouth of one of the cave's small chambers. As they enter, a lighted torch inside casts shadows on exposed documents and other items that will help them in their endeavor — to defeat terrorism.

SPC Chris Charlton works at the Fort Leonard Wood Public Affairs Office.

Some soldiers who deployed to Afghanistan to help rout Taliban and al-Qaeda forces from their hiding places searched similar caves, in the country's Tora Bora and Milawa Cave networks.

Those missions spurred officials at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., to incorporate cave-clearing training in the Engineer Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course.

Engineer ANCOC instructors developed the instruction because soldiers training at the Engineer School might deploy to Afghanistan, and cave-clearing missions might be among the duties soldiers will perform there for some time, said course chief 1SG Ronald Cook.

The Army's engineers, who usually deploy downrange to locate and eliminate booby traps and mines, need

to know how to perform those tasks inside caves, too, Cook said.

During a recent three-day exercise, some of the ANCOC students in Class 01-02 traveled to Miller Cave, located at Fort Leonard Wood, to complete the cave-clearing training.

As the soldiers approached the cave, they first secured the site by searching for simulated booby traps and land mines, and marked every device to preclude follow-on soldiers from passing by and setting them off.

As they neared the cave's entrance, the students advanced cautiously via move-and-cover maneuvers. One soldier inched forward as his peers provided cover.

Once inside the cave, the soldiers searched for more traps and mines, as well as "enemy" soldiers and their weapons. They "killed" one of two



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An engineer ANCOC student peers around a boulder inside the cave, looking for booby traps planted by the "enemy" during the training exercise.



After the exercise, 1SG Ronald Cook listens to student's comments on how well the training went.

opposing-force soldiers and "captured" the other during the training.

Cook said the cave-clearing training also hones leaders' combat skills. "Students learn how to be platoon sergeants in a combat environment," he said.

The training is beneficial because, "some of our guys may be going to units that will deploy to Afghanistan or the surrounding area when they leave here," said recent student SFC Curtis

Kibler, from Battery E, 19th Field Artillery Battalion, from Fort Sill, Okla.

Today, the United States faces conflicts that are different from those of the Cold War-era, he said. "The terrain we face today is much different, too," as are the techniques soldiers must use to fight.

"This is a first for me," said SFC Darrell Frasier of Fort Sill's Directorate of Public Works. "I've done

maneuver training before, but never in caves." The training was very successful, he said.

"Anytime you can go in with a platoon-sized element, capture the intended targets — in this case, people and equipment — and leave with no casualties, you've completed a very successful training rotation," Frasier said. □